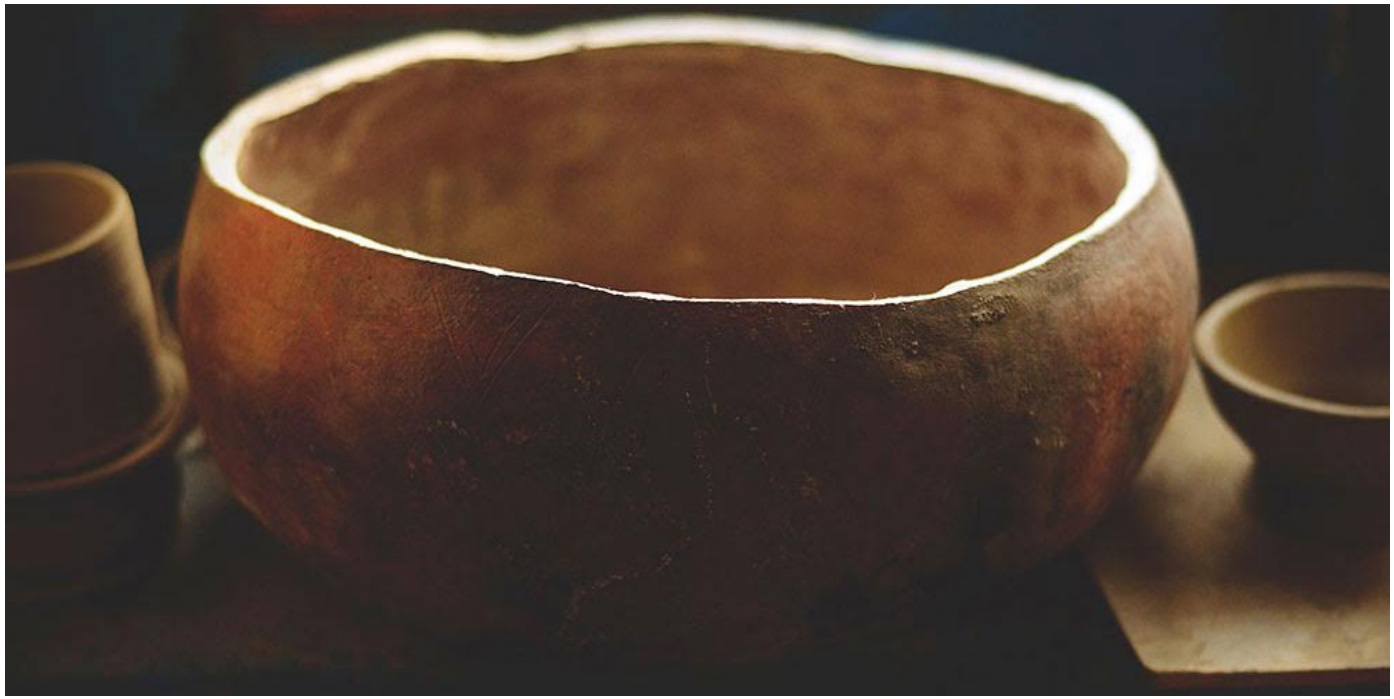
Design Resource

# Zama Pottery of Spiti Valley

The Craft of Clay Pottery

by
Palash Vaswani
IDC, IIT Bombay



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## Introduction

The high altitude territory of Spiti Valley is known for it barren landscapes, cold deserts and harsh climate; but the region is equally abundant in its ancient traditions and customs. Their rich heritage can be seen in their monasteries, traditional songs and dances and their vibrant art forms. One such amusing art form, from the high altitude terrains of the valley, is their Zama pottery. The craft of clay pottery, which originated as functional need, slowly took shape of a decorative product. Dorje Angtuk of Langza village is one the few potters who still knows the almost extinct art of Zama pottery.

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## History

The age-old tradition of pottery is a result of the geography of Spitian terrain, its resources, harsh climate and hard life of people of the valley. Initially, pottery was the functional need of its people and was made to use as utensils, vessels and other household items. Zama pots were used in almost everything like cooking, storing and even storing local barley beer. The yellow and black clay was easily available and had tremendous amount of plasticity and strength. Slowly it started evolving into various decorative items like pots, lamps and stand. Also In the early days, the cold weather did not allow any other crop than potatoes to grow in this region. So the zama pots made by the potters were used to exchange it from various other crops; mainly black peas. Today the climate has changed and the villages have started producing various other crops. The easy availability of plastic and steel utensils has made Zama pottery a dying craft.

Statue of Buddha that guards the village.

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Langza village with Chow Chow Kang Nilda mountain in the backdrop.

Langza Village.

Pea farms.

Barley farms.

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Zama Pots.

Zama Pots.

Zama Pots.

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Fossils of Langza Village.

Fossils of Langza Village.

Pea and Barley farms.

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## People

Spiti is home to its indigenous people belonging to Mahayana (Vajrayana) sect of Tibetan Buddhism, which is further divided into Sakyapa, Nyingmapa and Gelugpa. Each of these sects have specific regions in which they thrive; and their unique practices add diversity to the charm of the cultural life of the region. Langza village belongs to the Sakyapa sect and its primary source of occupation is agriculture. Also famous for its unique mud craft, Langza is home to potter Dorje Angtuk and his family. Having learnt the craft of Zama from his forefather, he is one of the few craftsmen who are still trying to keep the dying art alive. He lives with his wife along with his younger son Ishichupel and his family. Both the father-son duo received the training from Ecosphere to revive and restore this art. Their home also serves as a wonderful homestay for travelers, who visit the divine Himalayan village of Langza.

Dorje Angtuk's family in their pea farms.

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Dorje Angtuk and his son Ishichuppel.

Ishichuppel’s daughter.

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Dorje Angtuk's family.

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Pea harvesting.

Dorje Angtuk.

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Village's medical deity.

Dorje Angtuk.

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Dorje Angtuk.

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## Place

Spiti, locally pronounced as 'piti', literally means the word 'middle country'. Situated at the high altitudes of western Himachal Pradesh, cold deserts of Spiti valley is surrounded by snow-capped mountains and the River Spiti, which originates at Kunzum range and joins Sutlej River at Kinnaur valley. The valley lies very close to Tibet/China and its influence can be seen in ancient culture and tradition of the area. It is one of the least populated regions of the country. With maximum number of people belonging to Mahayana (Vajrayana) sect of Tibetan Buddhism, its rich heritage can be seen in its monasteries, traditional dances, songs and customs. In almost complete isolation from the outside world for centuries, Spiti has a culture centered around its art and crafts.

It is believed that Langza village derives its name from 'La', which means mountain pass, and 'Za' of Zama. It is also known as the potter's village because of its exclusive availability of the black clay. Situated at the height of 4400m, and guarded by the mighty Cho Cho Kang Nilda mountain range; Langza is a village with breathtaking view. Also known as 'headquarter' of the Gods of valley, the village is guarded by a giant statue of Lord Buddha, which is believed to keep the evil spirits away. The terrain is surrounded with fossils of Marine animals and plants, which dates back to the prehistoric era when Spiti was submerged in the Tethys Sea.

Langza village with Chow Chow Kang Nilda mountain in the backdrop.

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Chow Chow Kang Nilda mountain range.

Langza Village.

Chow Chow Kang Nilda peak.

Buddha's statue that guards the village.

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Buddha's statue that guards the village.

Langza Village.

Road to Komic village.

Langza Village.

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Langza Village.

Dorje Angtuk's home.

Langza Village.

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Local pit toilet.

Solar heater provided by Ecosphere.

Local pit toilet.

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Yellow billed Chough.

Dorje Angtuk's home.

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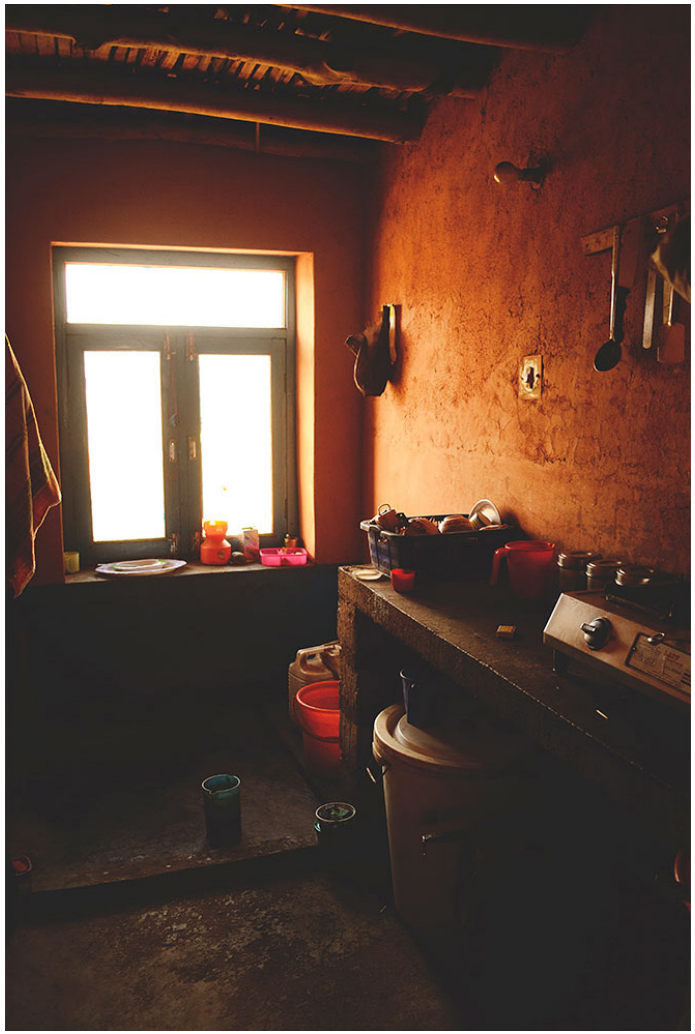
Dorje Angtuk's home.



Dorje Angtuk's home.

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Dorje Angtuk’s home.

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Dorje Angtuk’s home.

Terrace.

Terrace.

Yak skin.

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Terrace.

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Local temple.

Local temple.

Wall painting of local temple.

Fossils found in Langza village.

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Fossils found in Langza village.

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Fossils found in Langza village.

Farmlands of village.

Farmlands of village.

Barley.

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Chow Chow Kang Nilda mountain range.

Buddha’s statue that guards the village.

Chow Chow Kang Nilda peak.

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## Process

Fine black clay is collected from the mountain beds of Langza village and then is mixed with water. It is then refined with the help of a local filter 'channi' and is kept for sometime so that the refined clay particles are settled down, marking two layers of clay and water separate. Once it is settled, water is poured out and the clay is again poured into a porous sheet where it is refined again. The clay is then collected and beaten by hand continuously to make it soft. The clay is then molded by hands with the help of simple tools made of wood, leather and stone. The desired shape is given by adding more and more layers of clay on top of the base. Once the shape is achieved, it is kept under sun for drying. Other than Zame technique, potters also use potters wheel and later fire the pots in furnace with temperature around 900 ºC.

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Different sizes of brushes used for painting.

Glass bottle on which traditional designs are drawn.

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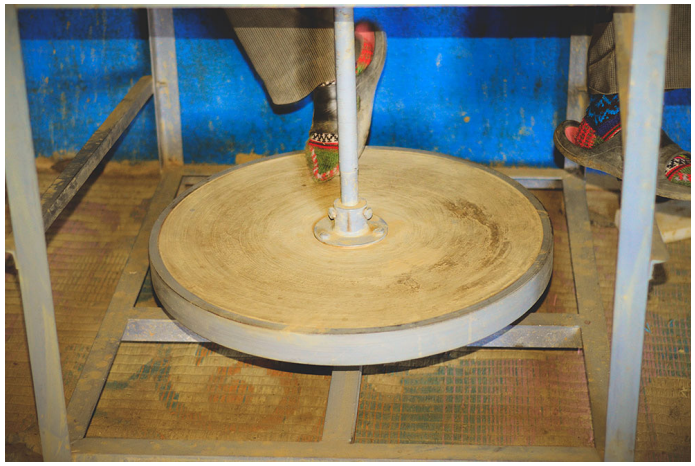

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http://www.dsource.in/resource/zama-pottery-spiti-valley/artefacts

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## Artefacts

The clay of Langza region has tremendous plasticity and strength, hence good for making big pots. Initially only zama pitchers and pots were made for sale in the local market. It gradually increased to decorative items like animal figures and sculptures. Now contemporary forms like penholders, lamps, paperweights and clay fossils are also made.

Zama Pot.

Zama Pot.

Design Resource

# Zama Pottery of Spiti Valley

The Craft of Clay Pottery

by
Palash Vaswani
IDC, IIT Bombay

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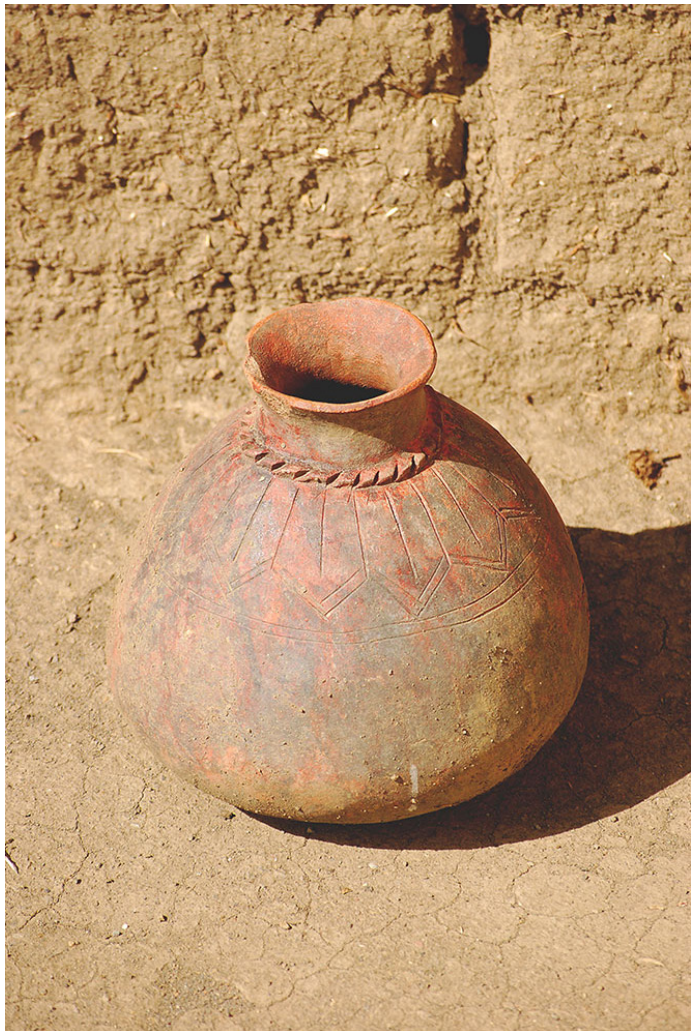

Zama Pot.

Zama Pot.

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Zama Pot.

Zama Pot.

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Zama Pot.

Clay Pottery.

Clay Pottery.

Clay Mug.

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Clay Pottery.

Clay Pottery.

Thapar.

Clay Pottery.

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Glazed clay fossil.

Clay Pottery.

Clay Pottery.

Clay fossil.

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Clay Pottery.

Clay Pottery.

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Clay Pottery.

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Glazed Cup.

Glazed Pot.

Glazed tea cup.

Glazed Pot.

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Glazed Pot.

Glazed Pot.

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Clay tea pot.

Decorative fossil impression.

Decorative saucer.

Ashtray.

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Paperweight.

Candle light stand.

Candle light stand.

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Cup.

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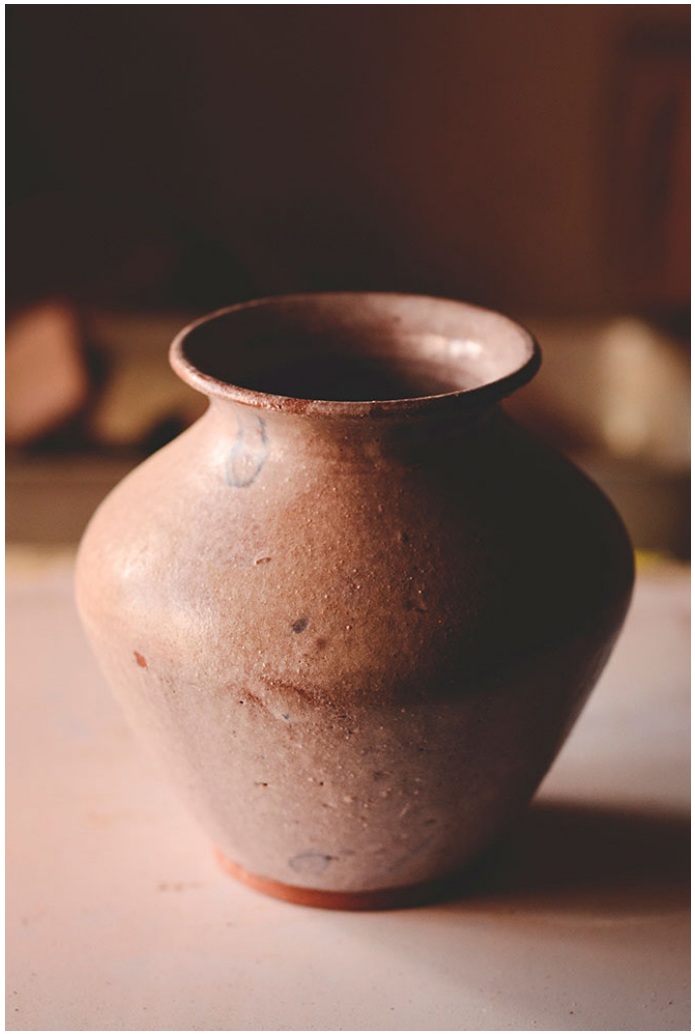
Bowl.

Mug.



Clay Pot.

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Clay saucer.

Clay bowl.

Clay Pots.

Planter.

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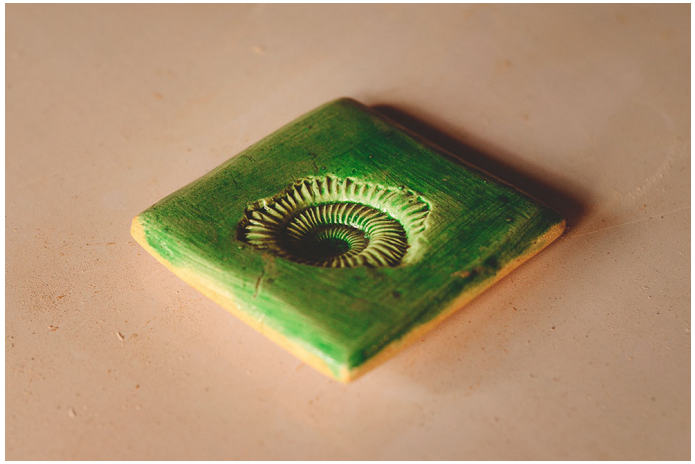
Clay Pot.

Clay Pot.



Fossil Impression.

Clay Pot.

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Clay Pot.

Clay Pot.

Clay Pot.

Clay Pot.

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Animal Figure.

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## Spiti Ecosphere

Ecosphere is a social enterprise, which is a collaborative effort of the local community of Spiti and professionals from diverse backgrounds, with a wide spectrum of skills and experience, effectively spanning the bridge from the general to the niche. With the focus of creating sustainable livelihoods that are linked to nature and culture conservation, the social enterprise is addressing the triple bottom-line of conservation, development and economies of the region. The organization, which started with finding an alternate livelihood for the locals by using local fruit of seabuckthorne, is now also working for sustainable eco-travel, solar technology, housing and nature and cultural conservation of the region. Ecosphere has been keenly involved in not only marketing the more popular crafts but is also in the process of reviving some of the traditional crafts that have almost died out or are slowly disappearing.

Ishita and Sunil are the co-founders of Ecosphere and have been working in the region since last 13 years. Their love for Himalayas brought them to Spiti and since then they have dedicated their lives for the betterment of the area. Cherring Norbu is a local from Demul village and is also the Manager of Spiti operations. His expertise lies in various fields like tourism, youth affairs, accounting, childcare, mountaineering, politics, solar energy and medicinal plants. He is also the winner of Mr. Spiti in 2001. Cherring Bodh is a master of all and also a mountaineer. A certified guide, he has done his mountaineering courses from Nehru Institute of Mountaineering, Uttarkashi.

Ecosphere office in Kaza.

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Ecosphere office in Kaza.

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Ishita Khanna, Co-founder of Ecosphere.

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Cherring Bodh, important team member of Ecosphere.

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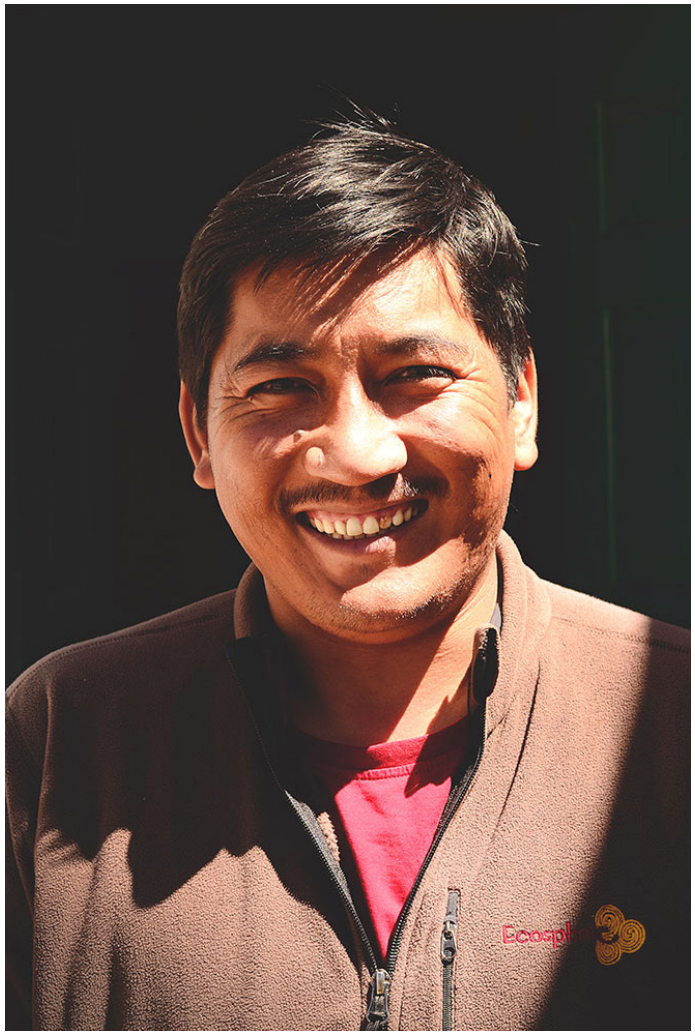
Sunil Chauhan, Co-founder of Ecosphere.



Cherring Norbu, Manager of Spiti operations.

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Ecosphere office in Kaza.

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Souvenir shop of Ecosphere.

Souvenir shop of Ecosphere.

Ecosphere office in Kaza.

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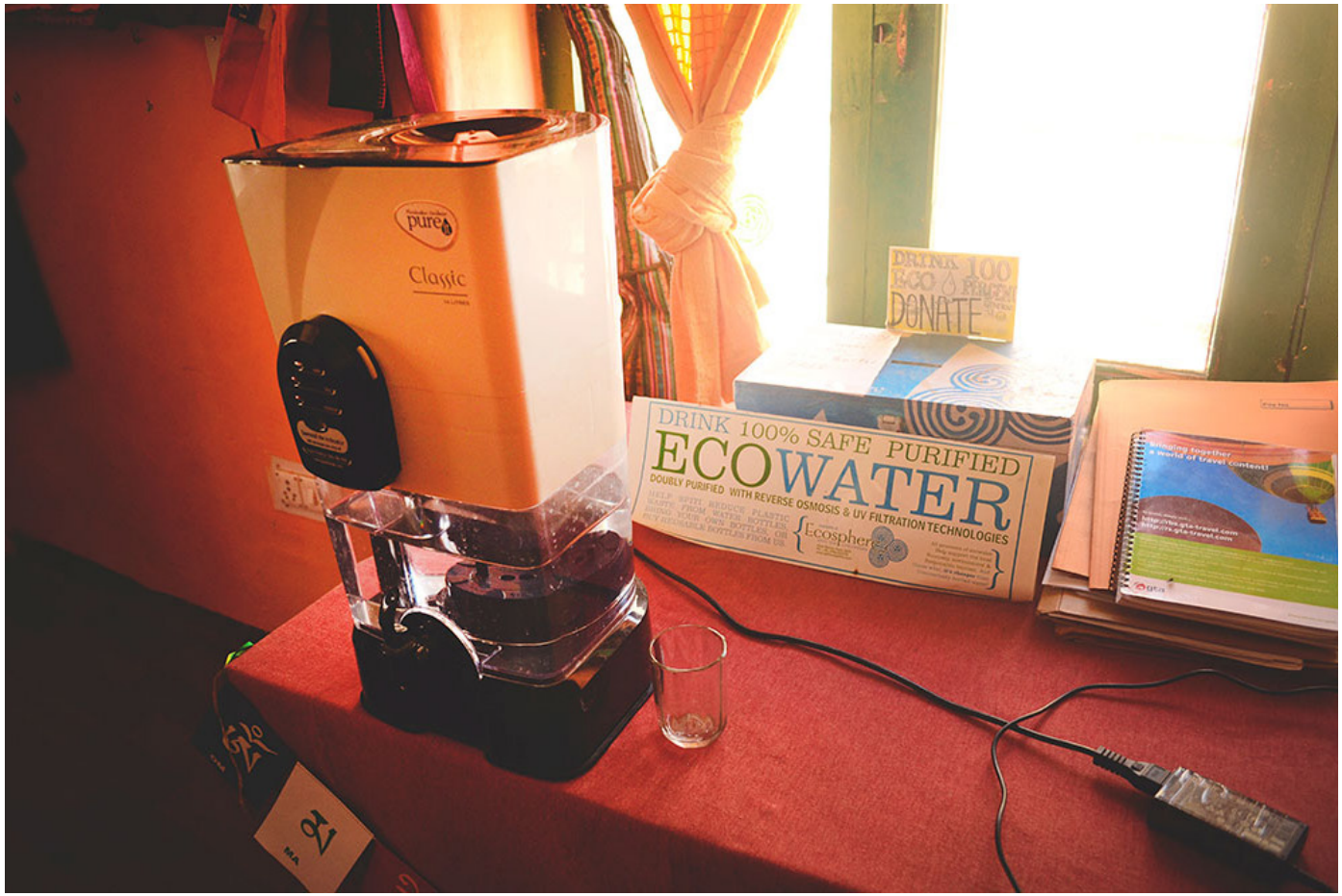


A place to fill your water bottles with eco-water.

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Thangka painting on display.

Thangka painting on display.

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Fossil on display.

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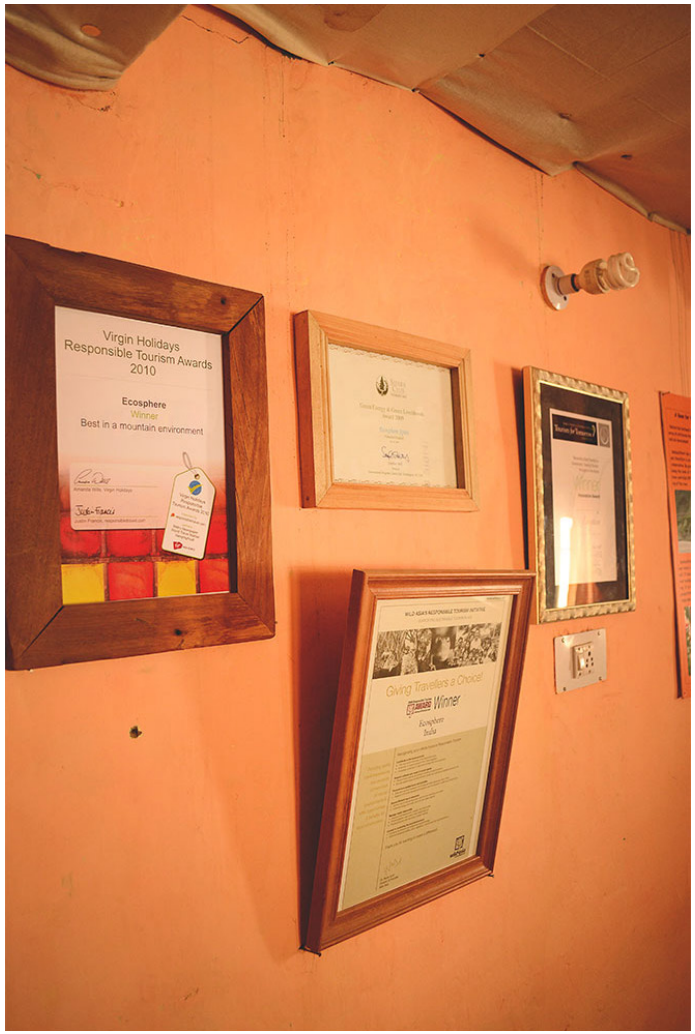


Ecosphere office in Kaza.

Sol café, a volunteer run coffee shop by Ecosphere.

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Sol café, a volunteer run coffee shop by Ecosphere.

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Solar cells on rooftop of Ecosphere office.

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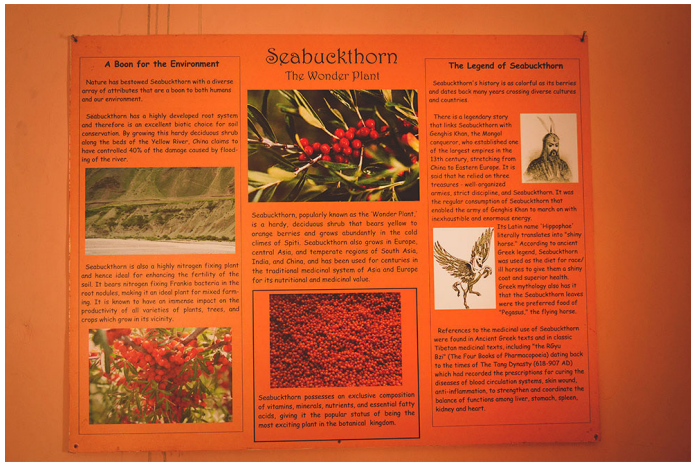
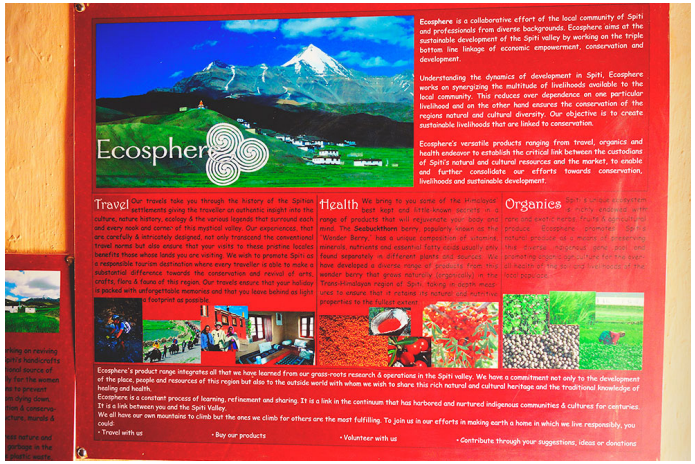
Sol café, a volunteer run coffee shop by Ecosphere.




Display section.

Display section.

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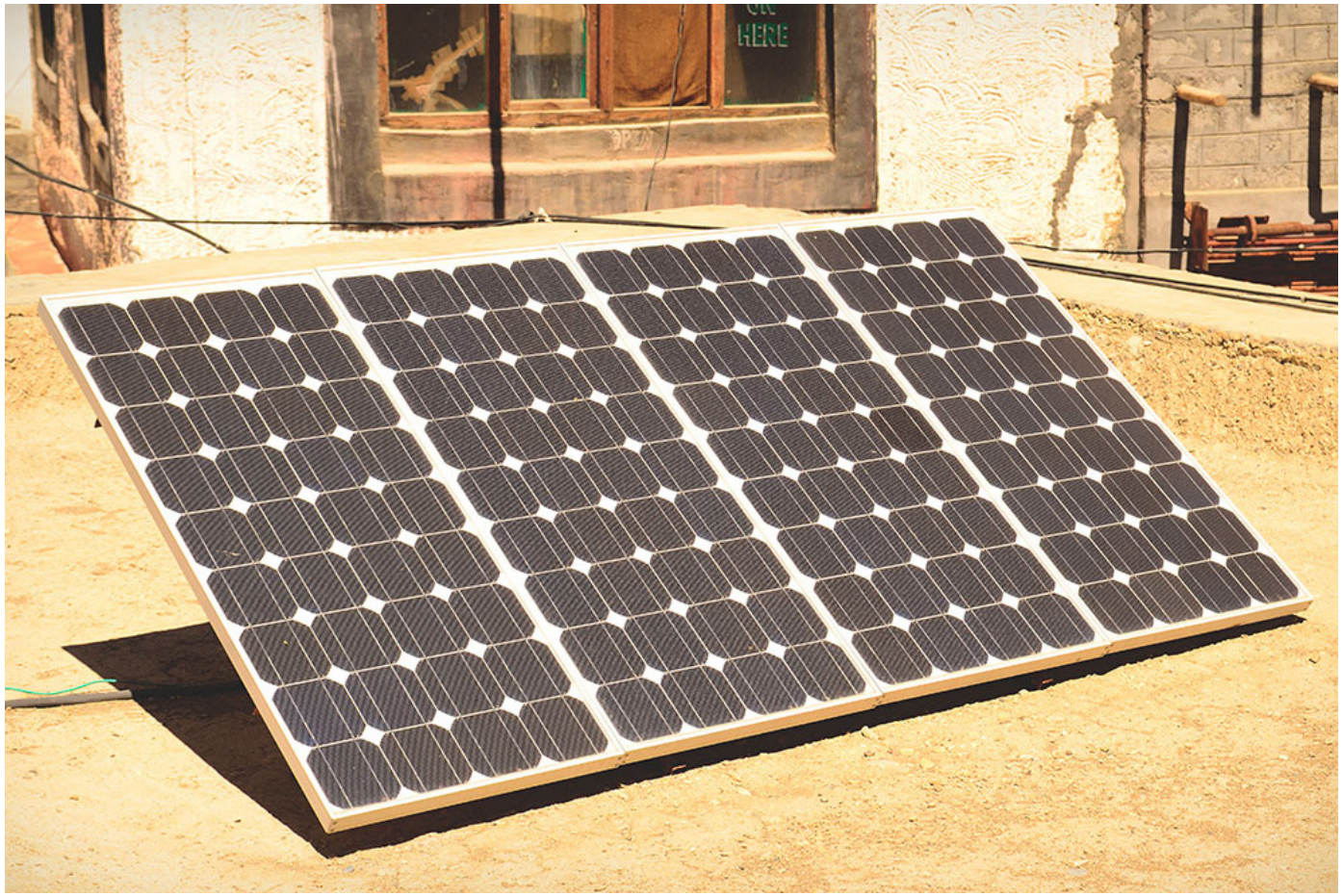


Solar cells on rooftop of Ecosphere office.

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Furnace for clay pottery.

Cherring Norbu's son.

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Kaza town of Spiti valley.

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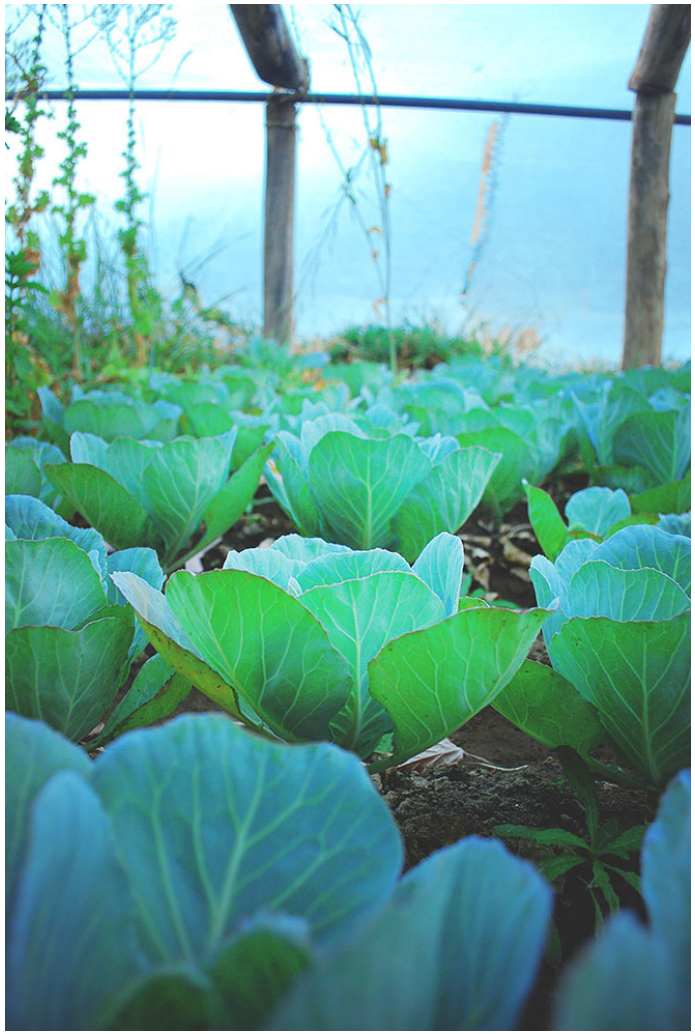
Greenhouse by Ecosphere.

Greenhouse by Ecosphere.



Greenhouse by Ecosphere.

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Greenhouse by Ecosphere.

Greenhouse by Ecosphere.

Cherring Norbu.

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## Contact Details

This documentation was done by Palash Vaswani, Design Associate at IDC, IIT Bombay.

You can get in touch with him at palsonline[at]gmail.com

You could write to the following address regarding suggestions and clarifications:

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